



# Job performance ratings: The relative importance of mental ability, conscientiousness, and career adaptability



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## ABSTRACT

According to career construction theory, continuous adaptation to the work environment is crucial to achieve work and career success. In this study, we examined the relative importance of career adaptability for job performance ratings using an experimental policy-capturing design. Employees ( $N = 135$ ) from different vocational backgrounds rated the overall job performance of fictitious employees in 40 scenarios based on information about their career adaptability, mental ability, conscientiousness, and job complexity. We used multilevel modeling to investigate the relative importance of each factor. Consistent with expectations, career adaptability positively predicted job performance ratings, and this effect was relatively smaller than the effects of conscientiousness and mental ability. Job complexity did not moderate the effect of career adaptability on job performance ratings, suggesting that career adaptability predicts job performance ratings in high-, medium-, and low-complexity jobs. Consistent with previous research, the effect of mental ability on job performance ratings was stronger in high- compared to low-complexity jobs. Overall, our findings provide initial evidence for the predictive validity of employees' career adaptability with regard to other people's ratings of job performance.

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## 1. Introduction

In a time characterized by rapid economic, social, and technological changes as well as increased complexity and diversity, individual adaptability – the ability to adapt to altered circumstances – becomes increasingly important. This is especially true for the work environment, where many employees now continuously face new demands, different surroundings, and diverse work groups (Savickas et al., 2009). This fundamental reshaping of the world of work also impacts on careers insofar as many employees do not permanently commit themselves to one employer anymore, but rather occupy different jobs throughout their lifetime (Biemann, Zacher, & Feldman, 2012; Savickas, 2006). Responding to these changing conditions, career construction theory (Savickas, 2002) attempts to explain how individuals cope with vocational tasks such as finding a job, acquiring relevant skills, and achieving career goals. According to career construction theory, continuous adaptation to the work environment is crucial to achieve subjective and objective work and career success. The ability of individuals to cope with current and anticipated career changes and challenges has received a great deal of research attention over the past years and is called career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

*Career adaptability* is a higher-order construct consisting of four psychosocial resources: *concern* is defined as the extent to which employees consider upcoming tasks and challenges. *Control* involves taking responsibility regarding one's own development and work environment. Exploring future opportunities and their possible consequences is described as *curiosity*. Finally, *confidence* means relying on one's own abilities when it comes to overcoming problems and drawbacks (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Several recent studies have shown that career adaptability predicts favorable outcomes, including career satisfaction, self-rated career performance,

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perceived person–environment fit, and occupational well-being (Guan et al., 2013; Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012; Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013; Zacher, 2014).

These findings provide evidence for the important role of career adaptability for a broad range of indicators of work and career success. However, the influence of employees' career adaptability on other people's ratings of job performance has so far not been investigated. *Job performance*, one of the most important outcomes in the work context, has been defined as the measurable proficiency of work behavior that is under employees' control and contributes to organizational goals (Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993). Since performance ratings can impact on employees' salary, promotion, and training program decisions, studying their predictors is of high relevance for both organizational researchers and practitioners. The goal of this study, therefore, is to examine the relative importance of career adaptability for job performance ratings using an experimental policy-capturing design (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Aiman-Smith, Scullen, & Barr, 2002). We take into account the influence of two established job performance predictors, mental ability and conscientiousness, and we investigate job complexity as a potential boundary condition of the effects of career adaptability on job performance ratings.

## 2. Hypotheses development

According to Savickas (2013), career adaptability is a modifiable resource that is accumulated over time and influences positively self-regulation strategies. Consequently, career adaptability is an important competency for employees to successfully manage the competing work demands that occur with environmental changes (Tolentino et al., 2014). In line with this, career construction theory postulates a positive relationship between adaptation on the one hand and satisfaction, development, and performance on the other (Savickas, 2013). Thus, we assume that career adaptability influences positively job performance ratings. Consistent with our assumption, previous empirical research has shown that career adaptability associated positively with self-assessed career performance (Zacher, 2014). However, so far no evidence exists for an effect of career adaptability on other people's ratings of job performance.

**Hypothesis 1.** Career adaptability has a positive effect on job performance ratings.

We decided to compare the effects of career adaptability on job performance ratings with the effects of mental ability and conscientiousness because these two constructs have been shown to consistently predict supervisor ratings of performance in various jobs and occupations (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Moreover, mental ability and conscientiousness are independent from each other (Mount, Barrick, & Strauss, 1999) and from career adaptability, which is an important prerequisite for distinguishing their respective influences on job performance ratings (Aiman-Smith et al., 2002). Specifically, mental ability appears to be unrelated to career adaptability (van Vianen, Klehe, Koen, & Dries, 2012), and career adaptability and conscientiousness have been shown to have only a weak to moderate positive correlation (van Vianen et al., 2012; Zacher, 2014).

Research on the main aspects of mental ability has often (though not universally) revealed the following characteristics: learning, problem solving, information processing, and reasoning. For example, Gottfredson (1997) described *mental ability* as “the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly and learn from experience” (p. 13). According to Jensen (1989), *learning* has occurred when a change in a specific response to a given stimulus, situation, or problem was observed. *Problem solving* can be defined as successfully transferring a given actual state to a target state by overcoming barriers (Dunbar, 1998). *Information processing* involves transforming information and creating new information (Oberauer, Süß, Wilhelm, & Wittman, 2003). Finally, *reasoning* “is a process which may occur at any point in a thought-movement and consists in the appreciation (...) of likeness and differences between old experiences and a new situation” (Skaggs, 1930, p. 439).

In their meta-analysis, Schmidt and Hunter (1998) identified mental ability as one of the best predictors of overall job performance with a predictive validity of  $\rho = .51$ . In another meta-analysis on the predictive validity of general mental ability for job performance, Bertua, Anderson, and Salgado (2005) distinguished between seven occupational groups (clerical, engineer, professional, driver, operator, manager, and sales). Their results showed significant validities for all those groups, ranging from  $\rho = .32$  for clerical to  $\rho = .74$  for professional occupations (see also Salgado, Anderson, Moscoso, Bertua, & de Fruyt, 2003). As mental ability has been shown to be a superior predictor of job performance, we expect that it will be a stronger predictor of job performance ratings than career adaptability.

**Hypothesis 2.** Mental ability has a stronger positive effect on job performance ratings than career adaptability.

Conscientiousness is one of the Big Five personality characteristics (Norman, 1963) and consists of the four narrow traits achievement, order, cautiousness, and dependability (Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006; Saucier & Ostendorf, 1999). *Achievement* is the tendency to strive for success and competence in one's work, including the adoption of high performance standards and working hard to accomplish one's goals (Hough, 1992). *Order* includes being thorough, well-organized, careful, and methodical. Overall, it describes the tendency to structure one's working environment (Stewart, 1999). *Cautiousness* means to consider risks before taking a course of action (Dudley et al., 2006). Finally, *dependability* reflects the disposition to be a reliable worker. People who score high on dependability are usually self-disciplined, honest, trustworthy, and accountable (Hough, 1992).

Meta-analyses summarizing predictive validities for the Big Five have shown a strong positive relationship between conscientiousness and job performance. Schmidt and Hunter (1998) reported an overall predictive validity of  $\rho = .31$ , and Barrick and Mount (1991) showed that the validity of conscientiousness generalized across different occupations. Results by Hurtz and Donovan (2000) were consistent with these findings. Their meta-analysis revealed an estimated true-score correlation of  $\rho = .22$  between

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